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NY Times
-19 April '74

Mr. Teng's Visit

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, April 18—A few days ago, Teng Hsiao-ping, the new 70-year-old Deputy Premier of China, flew to New York, had a long private conversation with Secretary of State Kissinger and flew back to Peking again as suddenly as he arrived.

This was Mr. Teng's first visit to the West in 48 years, and it may be that he merely wanted to see the United Nations in operation and show China's respect for the special session there on the price and distribution of raw materials in the world, but the assumption of most diplomats was that, like most world leaders these days, he wanted to see Mr. Kissinger.

This is becoming a common occurrence: When in doubt, see Henry. Something very unusual is going on now in relations between the nations. The political situation is unstable and unpredictable in Washington, Peking, Paris, London, Bonn, Tokyo, Jerusalem, Cairo, Damascus, and in many other capitals. The visit of Mr. Teng with Secretary Kissinger, which went almost unnoticed, as they hoped it would, merely illustrates the contemporary political confusion.

Peking wants to know what is happening to President Nixon, and whether it can rely on the agreements reached by the President in Peking and Shanghai. Washington wants to know what is happening meanwhile in the political changes taking place in China, and is much more worried than it lets on about the danger of war between Moscow and Peking.

The dominant personalities and tone of China's diplomacy are changing. Chou En-lai seemed to be the informing mind and the decisive voice in Peking when Mr. Nixon visited

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there. Mr. Chou dealt with the practical details of policy and established a close personal relationship with Mr. Kissinger.

But the messages from Peking to Washington now come directly from Mao Tse-tung through different envoys. On his last visit to Peking, Mr. Kissinger found that it was Mao Tse-tung who was defining, not merely the philosophy of China as before but the policy of China on Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Europe, Japan and atomic weapons. Chou En-lai remains the Premier of China but he seems to be less prominent now and references to him in diplomatic conversation are politely ignored by Chinese diplomats. Mr. Teng, when he was in New York, insisted that China's cautious policy of accommodation with the United States remained the same and wanted to be assured that Washington felt the same way, but Chou En-lai's name and role were seldom mentioned.

Washington wonders about all this. Mr. Kissinger is too shrewd and experienced to make a policy with a man instead of with a country, but he placed great reliance on Chou En-lai's moderation and historical vision.

The philosophic and historical sweep of Chou En-lai's mind obviously impressed Mr. Kissinger, but the other No. 2 men in China, Liu Shao-chi and Lin Piao, disappeared, and now even Mr. Chou seems to be losing his influence and changing his tune. Recently, he mocked President Nixon's favorite promise of a "generation of peace" and argued that "so long as imperialism exists, revolution and war are inevitable."

It is a dicey and dangerous time, for internal political weaknesses in nations not only impede progress but encourage foreign adventures and even the risk of disastrous wars. This could happen in the Middle East and along the Sino-Soviet border much more easily and suddenly than most people suppose, and the burden of avoiding it falls largely on the United States, and also under the present circumstances in Washington, on the judgment and energy of Henry Kissinger.

In the last few days, he has not only been seeing Mr. Teng from Peking and Mr. Gromyko from Moscow, the Secretary General of the United Nations, the President of Algeria, Gen. Moshe Dayan of Israel and the intelligence chief of Syria, but the foreign ministers of the Latin-American republics, the members of the foreign and military affairs committees of the Congress, and the inquisitive reporters of the press.

Mr. Teng, the old revolutionary, is only the latest symbol of the problem. Next week, having talked to all these people, Secretary Kissinger will be seeing the Soviet foreign minister again in Geneva, before he goes on to the Middle East to try to stop the fighting between Israel and Syria along the Golan Heights, and before he arranges Mr. Nixon's forthcoming visit to Moscow.

So the importance of being Henry has its responsibilities. He doesn't have the answer to all these problems. Senator Jackson of Washington thinks Mr. Kissinger is all wrong on most of them, and even Kissinger's old colleagues in the universities are fussing at him, but the weaker President Nixon becomes politically, the more the leaders of the world like Mr. Teng turn to him for guidance and support.

Fortunately, in the confusion of domestic and world politics, Mr. Kissinger had the good judgment to get married, and now all he has to do is find a house he can afford in Washington for his new bride, and then figure out when he is ever going to find time to get home.